



## VILLA DI MASSETO BY JONATHAN WHILEY

**Midnight in the Tuscan hills;** an Aperol spritz-addled afternoon has succumbed to a rosé dappled sunset and the malevolent beauty of a leggy glass of silky red is causing misty visions and cloudy judgement.

Ensnared amid the company of close friends in the balmy courtyard of the palatial Villa Di Masseto, a prolonged growl from the bushes elicits an involuntary high-pitched squeal.

Set at the edge of a tiny hamlet just north of historic Fiesole, this sprawling 16th-century villa is surrounded by lush and untamed countryside, where wild boars snuffle between the arms of an

evergreen giant. It's an immersive experience; one in which a boar roaming the perfectly manicured gardens merely seems an extension of a newly formed reality.

Except on this occasion it's not a beast of the night. It's an undignified encounter with a sprinkler system as it splutters into life.

Even in the Bible black darkness I can feel my blanched face ripening like a sun-kissed Roma tomato.

Firing the imagination and wielding the power of seduction is the modus operandi of Masseto. Part femme fatale, part grand Italian dame, it became part of Tuscany Now & More's collection of luxury villas a decade ago.

The villa's heritage is as rich as any ragù. For centuries it was home to one of the most powerful families in Italy

– the Guadagni family – who were head of the Florentine state during the 14th and 15th centuries.

Their place in history is as indelible as the elegant retreat they once occupied. Faded family crests are painted above the front and back entrances, a crumbling fresco is carved into a grotto and much of the original terracotta tile flooring remains.

Grandeur on such a castle-like scale prompts childlike excitement. Four floors, three sitting rooms, two loggias, a billiards room and a spectacular tower with arresting views tell only half the story. The villa's 126 seats in communal areas alone – yes, I counted – might help to fill in the gaps.

For all the striking aesthetics – from antique chandeliers and giant ornate mirrors to framed peacock feathers and an old bust – it's the ability to simplify life that sits under your fingernails.

Come here to read and swim and gaze and laze. Sip crisp, lemony prosecco in the custardy sun. Listen to the trickling of the stream with an espresso. Watch black squirrels fumble in the trees. Cycle through quaint communes. Stroll to the nearest trattoria and feast on Bistecca alla Fiorentina – blushing T-bone steak – best served with a heavy dose of peppery olive oil.

When that all becomes too much – naturally – then make use of the fantastic concierge service as a butler-like supplement to the maid who arrives daily.

Seemingly anything and everything can be arranged; yoga classes, shopping tours, day trips to Florence and Siena, cookery lessons, babysitting, truffle hunting, grocery shopping, the list goes on.

A private tour of the family-run I Balzini estate – the only vineyard in the region producing solely “Super Tuscan” wines – is a must.

After an introduction to their “new babies” – special sized bottles in a room christened “the nursery” – you are served a leisurely lunch which includes liberal samples of their award-winning wine. Like everything else in Italy, there are no half measures.

Generosity seems engrained into the DNA of Italians. When two private chefs arrive at the villa one evening, they announce: “You will eat like a lorry driver from Florence tonight!” before a procession of five simple, hearty, seasonal courses.

I've been coming to Italy since I was a teenager and the artichoke tart and meatballs I devoured that evening are among the most memorable dishes I've ever eaten.

When food of this calibre collides with laugh-until-you-cry company and gorgeous surroundings, it ensures a life-affirming experience that clings

to your soul like bubble wrap. Everything else becomes a backing dancer; even Trump, for a week, becomes a footnote. The potent emotional cocktail of leaving Masseto is made trickier with every appearance of housekeeper Benedetta, the jewel in the villa's crown.

Quite possibly the friendliest woman alive, her beaming smile and infectious energy should be bottled immediately. Her consistent ability to go above and beyond was remarkable; from arranging pizzas to be delivered from the local restaurant for our late arrival to sourcing a spectacular chocolate cake from a specialist shop in nearby Florence for a friend's birthday.

Little wonder there are personal cards, drawings and endless messages in the guestbook. One family said Benedetta was “their guardian angel.” It's apt. Spending time here proves a high-on religious experience. Benedetta understands; she simply describes it as “heaven”.

**Tuscany Now & More** ([tuscanynowandmore.com](http://tuscanynowandmore.com), 0207 684 8884) offers seven nights in Villa Di Masseto from £6,284 to £9,854 per week based on 20 people sharing on a self-catering basis. It has a range of properties across the region and Italy, and can provide private chefs, excursions and other services on request.

